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ABSTRACT

People who write about children's writing today stress that it is a highly personal process. The process can also be an interpersonal one. The support of other children seems to give security in the writing act. In a secure classroom where it is safe to try new things, there is little danger that a child will become dependent on the group situation and be unable to write a story on his own. The interpersonal experience, when children discuss with each other what they are writing, leads to increased maturity in their writing. By sharing ideas children can take the same basic concept and give it different treatments. Even with the interpersonal exchanges the creative writing turns out to be personal and unique. (RB)

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WRITING: AN INTERPERSONAL AS WELL AS PERSONAL PROCESS #1974

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Suppose I were to ask you to write the story of your trip--to take out pencil and paper and begin now. How would you feel? Challenged? Threatened? Bothered? Would you feel somewhat better if I said that you did not have to show the results to anyone, unless you wanted to? Perhaps. Most people do feel more free to start writing, for it is a very personal process. We teachers know this, but sometimes we forget just how personal the process is. I recommend teachers trying assignments that they give to their students. It will help them know firsthand what the experience is like.

Of course, we read about it in the professional literature. People who write about children's writing today stress that it is a highly personal process. Writing as a form of self-expression is just as personal as speech. It evolves from the personality, experience, and application of the writer and becomes a highly personal extension of self.

The process can also be an interpersonal one, I have found. The interpersonal aspects can be as satisfying as the personal ones. As long ago as 1963, when I was visiting schools in England, I became quite impressed by the interesting creative writing going on in the primary schools. There I became acquainted with what the British called team writing. Teams of children wrote, illustrated, and bound stories as a cooperative venture. The idea of groups making their own books seemed widely used in England. This idea appeared to be quite useful in stimulating children who found the task of writing overwhelming in its entirety--from conception of idea to execution. The support of classmates was invaluable. Each team member could contribute ideas, and each could have a task that suited his or her talents in carrying them out. As the children became more skilled in writing, they tried different tasks, and eventually would branch out to try a story of their own. Team writing seemed to be a steppingstone for reluctant writers as well as a satisfying kind of team effort.

I subsequently tried the idea in my own elementary classes, and found it quite effective with younger children. The support of other children seemed to give security in the writing act. Of course, there comes a time when the child will want to write his own story. Older children seem to like to try both processes: sometimes writing individually and sometimes writing in teams, as they choose.

In a secure kind of classroom where it is safe to try new things, there is little danger that a child will become dependent on the group situation and be unable to write a story on his own. I believe both options should be open to children, the option to write alone or to write with others. Working with others gives the beginner a chance to experience success in writing; it gives children a chance to exchange ideas; and it can build positive interpersonal relationships.

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Another interpersonal kind of experience occurs when children discuss with each other what they are writing, even though each is writing an individual story. At one point in my teaching life, I encouraged children not to talk to their classmates when writing, for fear they would talk their ideas out and then not want to put them on paper. I did not want them to lose the freshness of their ideas.

Then I read a study by Beeker (1970)[1] in which she found that verbalization of one's own ideas is more conducive to mature writing than is listening to others' ideas (i.e., listening to the teacher discussing ideas for writing). She concluded that more paired-student activity should be introduced into the language program in order to give the individual child more talking time. If verbalization of one's own ideas led to increased maturity of writing, then my fears that children would "talk" out their ideas seemed groundless and encouraging children not to talk while writing was no doubt having the opposite effect of what was intended. I abandoned my cautions and waited to see what would happen.

Now, when my pupils write, they talk freely with each other, whether they are writing individual or team stories. Their writing, if anything, is more creative than before. Certainly, the talking does not keep them from putting their ideas on paper. And they do seem to have a very enjoyable time together as they write. Evidently, the interpersonal process can be as satisfying as the purely personal one, and sometimes more so.

In an atmosphere of security and mutual trust, there is no problem of one child copying another's ideas. Shared ideas, of course, are important. Children can take the same basic idea and give it different treatments. Even in the interpersonal process, the stories, or products, turn out to be personal and unique. Shared ideas are important in another way. Children can test out ideas on each other and refine their ideas before putting them on paper--or revise them afterwards.

The classroom becomes a community of writers with each child testing out his ideas on others, who, in turn, become "language teachers," as they react to and criticize the ideas presented. Peer teaching can be quite effective, as it occurs in a warm, secure, non-threatening situation. I submit that children have a rightful place--an important one, in fact--in this community of language teachers we are discussing here in Seattle.

The other teachers that I like to involve in the children's writing program are the authors of children's books. An author, discussing the writing experience, can open up new vistas for children, new avenues in writing. Children can become more aware of character development, point of view, setting, and other elements of writing, through hearing firsthand about the writing of a favorite book.

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[1]Ruth Ann Beeker. The Effects of Oral Planning on Fifth Grade Composition. (Doctoral dissertation, North Texas State University) Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1970.

Robert Burch, in answering children's questions at the McGuffey Laboratory School, told how he starts with a character and gets to know that character very well in his mind before he ever starts to write.[2] This kind of exchange gives children a new perspective on the art of writing.

Children, given the opportunity, will ask many questions of visiting writers:

> Where do you get your ideas?
> Are your characters based on real people you have known?
> Did you write stories when you were a child?

In the interaction between author and children, many ideas are raised and discussed. The experience is a stimulating one for children. They often gain ideas that help them in their own writing. The interpersonal process feeds the personal process. With interpersonal foundations, the personal process becomes richer and the product is enhanced.

Bringing in authors as teachers is not intended to encourage every child to make writing a career. Rather, it is a way of helping children acquire greater understanding of the writing process--and greater appreciation.

Finally, teachers ought to be part of the community of writers in a classroom. Teachers should share in the writing process, too. Even if they can only take a few minutes to write, or failing that (Teachers, after all, do sometimes have to offer spelling support and other guidance to children as they write), if they can let children know that they <u>do</u> write, it will show their pupils that they value writing as an enjoyable and worthwhile activity. Writing periods will not be seen, then, as just something for teachers to give children to do. When teachers join in the writing process, it becomes a shared and special experience. For the teacher, it is a way of knowing what the children are experiencing as they try to express their ideas.

Teachers <u>who</u> <u>write</u> will be in a better position to help children with writing strategy as needed. They will understand what is needed, what decisions have to be made. Points for teacher-pupil discussion about story writing may include the following:

> How do you get into a story; how do you decide where to begin?
> Through whose eyes does the story unfold? Yours? A character's? Several characters?
> How do you let your readers know what a character is like--in a convincing way?
> How do you tell the happenings so that your story moves along and is not boring?
> How do you choose an appropriate setting?
> How can the ending be worked out so that it does not appear to be forced?

When teachers and children share their questions, frustrations, joys, and successes with each other, the whole process takes on interpersonal dimensions.

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[2]Children's Literature Workshop, Miami University, July 30, 1971.

In summary, the ways in which writing can be an interpersonal process include:

1. Team writing in which children work together to produce a story or a book;
2. Paired student testing of ideas about individual stories;
3. Authors serving as part of the community of language teachers;
4. Teachers sharing in the writing experience with children.

I recommend more interpersonal experiences in the writing process as an aid not only to greater satisfaction in writing, but also to improved writing, in general.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you some advice to teachers written by ten and eleven year old children.

"Don't always make us do assignments. It's a lot easier to write what we want."

"I think teachers should talk with the kids and discuss."

"Don't do the same things all the time. You should do different and interesting things."

"If I were a...teacher, I wouldn't think about me. I'd think about what kinds of things we could do together."

Personal writing can at times, I believe, fall into the category of an activity to be shared.

--Eileen Tway